Deprived of a Great New Fighting Aircraft

RCAF Looks Back

THIS MONTH the Royal Canadian Air Force celebrates its 35th official birthday.

Actually, Canada's fighting air service goes back considerably farther, for the Canadian Aviation Corps—comprising two officers and one airplane—was formed on Sept. 16, 1914.

Canadian airmen fought magnificently long before the birth of the RCAF; but by the latter part of 1943 the service had reached a peak strength, with 215,200 men and women on roster. It was established as one of the most competent and effective fighting forces in the world.

Canadian airmen distinguished themselves in the 1914-18 war. When W. A. "Billy" Bishop was a youthful captain with the Royal Flying Corps he won Canada's first Victoria Cross in air combat during an attack on a German aerodrome. Subsequently he was to become the top fighter pilot with the British forces in his score of "kills," 72 enemy aircraft going down under his guns.

A. A. McLeod won Canada's second aerial VC in March of 1918.

Col. W. G. Barker was the third, winning his award "for valor" in combat with 60 enemy aircraft, four of which he shot down in spite of his multiple wounds.

Following formation of the RCAF, it was agreed that a number of Canadian squadrons should be formed to become an integral part of it. That was on May 29, 1918, so that date marks the real beginning of a truly Canadian fighting air force.

By the end of the First World War, more than 22,000 Canadians had served with British air services, 1,563 had given their lives, and over 800 were decorated. It was a splendid, if painful, beginning.

Meanwhile, the first two all-Canadian squadrons had been formed in England, and the United Kingdom presented to Canada some 80 aircraft, together with all other necessary equipment to operate an air force of her own. A number of American aircraft, which had been operating out of Canadian Atlantic ports, were donated by the Washington government.

So the little Canadian air force grew, from British seed, in a sense, and for the next many years was to fly British-designed aircraft almost exclusively.

KING GEORGE V conferred the prefix "Royal" upon the Canadian Air Force in 1923, and the first course of new pilots began at Camp Borden with C. R. Slemon one of its members. Thirty years later Air Marshal Slemon became Chief of Air Staff, and is now Deputy Commander of the North American Air Defence system, NORAD.

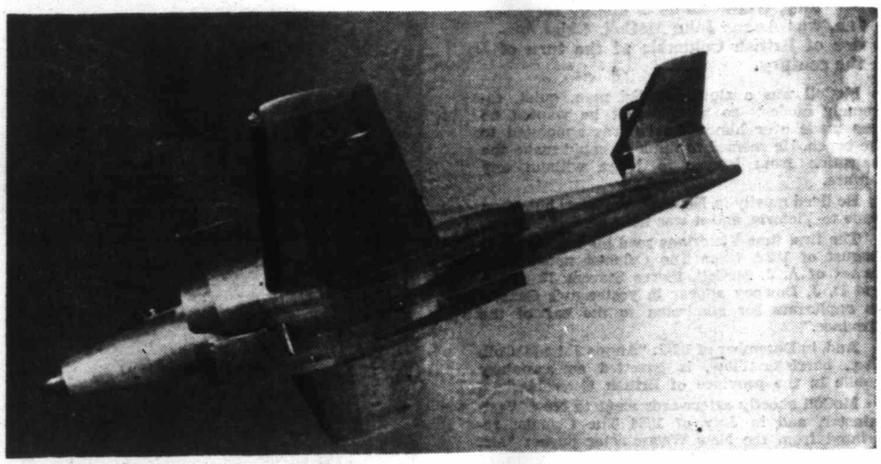
On April 1, 1924—the official birthday—the RCAF was organized on a permanent basis. Its initial strength was 65 officers and about 200 airmen. In addition to the headquarters at Ottawa, there were six stations: Dartmouth, N.S., Ottawa (Rockcliffe), old Camp Borden, Winnipeg, High River, Alta., and Jericho Beach, Vancouver. The functions of the force were, in order, service training, aeronautical research, and civil government operations, such as mapping.

For the next few years, although growth was not spectacular, the RCAF was developing techniques and the aircraft industry was beginning to develop in this country to supply the air arm. The Vickers Vedette was the first Canadian designed and produced aircraft to enter service. It came to the air force in October, 1924.

More and more the civilian aspects of flying were occupying the RCAF's attention in the late 'twenties. In 1930, for example, these civil operations reached a total of nearly 15,000 hours in photographic survey, forest patrol, transportation, wheat dusting, and like tasks. And the air force got its biggest appropriation in that year, $7,474,700, and reached its greatest strength, 906 men of all ranks.

Then the axe fell!

Times were getting tougher and the cry was retrenchment. The government at Ottawa was desperately looking for means of reducing its budget. Economies were essential. And it didn't appear too drastic a move to slash the RCAF appropriation to a mere $1,750,000! In that same fiscal year, 1931-32, the RCAF dropped 78 officers and 100 airmen from the roster. Civil operations were drastically curtailed.



This is the Avro Canuck—the CF-100—a long-range, all-weather interceptor, wholly designed and built in Canada and providing part of Canada's and NATO's first line of defence. These are night fighter aircraft, elder brother of the CF-105, the Avro Arrow, which the Canadian government has refused to deliver to the RCAF on grounds missiles are a better defence and costs less prohibitive.

This was a real heartbreak for the dedicated personnel of the service. Not only did it mean loss of valuable men and an almost dead-end in development, it hurt morale—in much the same way as the scrapping of the costly, hard-hitting Avro Arrow program was to do nearly 30 years later.

BUT THERE WAS A change of policy in 1934. Appropriations were increased, new personnel were recruited, new aircraft were added. Dartmouth was reopened and the development at Trenton was resumed. Civil operations began to expand again, but the emphasis was on the "service" aspect of the force. Squadron formations reappeared, surveys were in hand to select new operational bases, and courses were introduced to train air gunners, wireless operators, explosives and armament staff. By 1935 the Camp Borden training centre was established, and still more aircraft were added to the squadrons.

As early as 1937, initial training was made available to candidates for the RAF at RCAF bases. The following year the RCAF attained equal status with the other two branches of armed service, and the senior air officer was no longer responsible to the chief of the general staff. The SAO, Air Vice Marshal G. M. Croil, was designated chief of air staff.

The RCAF had come of age.

However, it was not until Feb. 17, 1939, that the first squadron began to re-equip with Hawker Hurricanes to replace the long obsolete Siskins. It was the Hurricane, with the famous Spitfire, which turned back the German invasion tide in 1940. But the little fabric-winged Siskins played their part, too. They were fast, for their time, and Canadians were quick to learn their idiosyncrasies which was useful knowledge when it came to flying the faster, heavier Hurricanes.

This writer remembers a demonstration of aerobatics in Toronto in 1927 by a team of RAF pilots in Siskins which held a vast crowd breathless. These pilots toured the continent; and none had ever seen before such aerial acrobatics, such precision and control as these young RAF officers displayed.

With Hurricanes, the RCAF began to feel it was once more a fighting force and when they were ordered to war stations in August, 1939, they had new confidence. Time was running out. There would still be a breathing spell, when industry could gear to rush new aircraft to the British and Commonwealth squadrons, but it had been a precarious gamble, that delay in re-equipping with modern fighters.

By the time Canada declared war on Sept. 10, the RCAF had a strength of 4,061 officers and airmen (including 1,013 in the auxiliary, formed in 1932). There were eight permanent and 12 auxiliary squadrons. And there were 270 aircraft.

But in this aggregate were no less than 23 different types! And only the Hurricane was a first line service machine. There were very few of them.

IN PASSING it should be mentioned that Canada, as early as December, 1939, had agreed to set up the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. The United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand were signatories. Extended and expanded several times during the war years, the scheme was terminated on March 31, 1945, when it was considered that an ample reserve of trained men had been graduated. From the scheme 131,553 air crew were trained for Royal air forces.

Perhaps it was due in part to the experience gained in this operation, but whatever the reason highly placed RAF officers in Europe told this writer, in 1956, that Canadian fighter crews were undoubtedly the best the NATO forces possessed. What was the secret? "I wish I knew," said one much-decorated RAF air commodore at Versailles. "The Canadians seem to have a special gift for aerial combat. And their aircraft, of course, are second to none."

In May, 1940, the first minister of national defence for air was named at Ottawa. He was the late C. G. "Chubby" Power, a veteran of the First World War and a man who realized the value of strong air defence forces. He was a true friend of the RCAF.

By August, 1940, Canadians were in action in earnest. They had participated in some desultory fighting over the Continent, but Squadron Leader E. A. McNab led his No. 1 (Fighter) Squadron into the Battle of Britain skies to engage the overwhelming numbers of the attackers at this time. McNab's pilots were credited with 30 aircraft destroyed, they won the RCAF's first decorations, and suffered the first casualties among Canadian squadrons during the period of these operations. From that time on, RCAF units were in the thick of the fighting.

RCAF bombers, British-built Wellingtons, made their first assault June 12, 1941. By the end of the war the RCAF was sending out 200 heavy-bomber raids, as well as flying with Coastal Command in the anti-submarine war.

In 1942, Canadian squadrons went out to Egypt and Ceylon. And with the entry of Japan into the war, further RCAF forces flew to Alaskan bases.

When No. 6 (RCAF) Group in Bomber Command became operational at the beginning of 1943, it went into action with eight squadrons, mostly Wellingtons. By the end of the war the group comprised 14 squadrons, all flying the much bigger Halifax or the famous Avro